



## Delivering Effective Customer Service

By Rebecca A. Morgan  
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*It's cheaper and easier to keep existing customers than to gain new ones, yet many firms ignore poor customer interfaces that drive away clientele.*

No matter what horrible, maddening customer-service experience I might share with you, you could no doubt match it with several of your own. Who hasn't felt both their voice and blood pressure rise when dealing with an airline, cell phone, or utility customer service representative? We all know that it is both cheaper and easier to keep existing customers than to gain new ones, yet so many organizations seem to ignore poor customer interfaces that drive away clientele and create negative chatter.

Customer service is a golden opportunity to interact with customers, enhancing both loyalty and sales. Yet customer service poorly delivered can destroy a business. A good process for delivering customer service is fundamental to growing your business. Let's take a look at two organizations that specialize in servicing the customers of other companies to see what we can learn.

Alpine Access is an Inc. 500 company located in Golden, Colo., that provides outsourced call-center services. Alpine's over 4,000 employees, the majority of whom have attended college, provide incoming call customer service for companies such as 1-800-Flowers and Office Depot. Its employees, located across the country, work from their homes using Internet access and telephones to provide sales and customer-service support for Alpine client companies. Training is computer-based, utilizing Web conferencing and related technologies.

Why would a company believe the Alpine workforce might be better at providing customer service than its own? Alpine's business model allows them to cherry pick employees, without any geographical limitations to recruiting. Alpine also avoids the brick and mortar costs of centralized call centers. Reg Foster, Alpine's Chairman and CEO, believes they are experts on recruiting, training, and managing excellent customer service personnel on a distributed basis. Foster says "the Alpine business model is disruptive technology for the call center industry, whether outsourced or not."

Now let's look at Integrated Marketing Technologies, a company located in Brunswick, Ohio. Jeff Wood, IMT's President and CEO, has built a growing business

delivering the customer services that client companies simply aren't designed to provide. Working with the food and beverage industries, IMT has expanded its service offerings simply by listening to clients complain about customer interfaces that they find difficult to do well themselves.

Sara Lee Foodservice operations aren't designed to send 12 sample wings to a tavern near you. But if they hope to have that tavern offer their wings for sale, they need to do just that. And they need a method to follow up on (1) did the wings arrive in good condition with cooking instructions included, (2) did the salesman follow up on the sample, (3) did the tavern order more wings, and (4) what other menu items might the tavern offer that could be met through Sara Lee Foodservice products?

Initially founded on creating customized databases for tracking and reporting on sales leads, IMT has expanded into handling specialized samples and processing B2B rebate checks. Again by listening to customer-described challenges, IMT is now supporting client needs created by the significant trend to customized print-on-demand labels and signs for specialized low-volume applications.

It's not that Sara Lee Foodservice, or ConAgra Foods, or Clorox couldn't do these things themselves. It's just that they are not designed to do so. Each of those companies, and many others, have decided to outsource parts of their customer service process to a company dedicated to providing specialized support services.

So what do we learn from looking at Alpine Access and Integrated Marketing Technologies? The lessons are not as much about outsourcing opportunities as

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they are about what your competition is doing to provide excellent customer service.

Whether you offer these services yourself, or you outsource them, the provision of competitive customer services at competitive costs is integral to growth. Looking at Alpine Access and IMT tells us it is important to be able to answer the following questions with a resounding “yes.”

- Do your processes for recruiting, training, and managing customer service personnel support appropriate levels of customer service at a competitive cost?

- Do your customer-service processes include accurate and timely communication of product and policy updates?
- Do your customer-service processes include information that enables you to grow your business?
- Are you set-up to handle the mass customization that may be key to supporting and growing your market?

Each interface with a customer, whether current or potential, is a great opportunity. Make the most of it.



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